

Opening the Door

A Truly Northern Experience

by Christy Norwood

A shot gun goes off mere metres from my head. My eyes pop open in sheer surprise and fright. The sun is just barely making light through the thin tent walls and the hoods of my sleeping bags have done nothing to muffle the sound. It is 4:45 am. Sarah groans, "That better be a bear." Michelle says, "I think he wants us to get up." And I shakily say, "He can't be serious."

Our Dene friend Ron is chuckling to himself, and yelling at us to get up. There is reason to squish the temptation of remaining snuggled in to sleep; the snow has lightly dusted the mossy ground and wild cranberries beneath the weathered and gnarled jack pines, immense pieces of blue ice are crashing down the Snowdrift River below where we lay, the fire is already crackling promises of breakfast, and the rolling hills of the Northwest Territories are challenging us to more adventures. I can do nothing but laugh at this peculiar alarm clock as I unzip my sleeping bag and briefly reflect on my previous few weeks.

Three weeks ago I boarded a Greyhound bus with six of my fellow fourth year buddies to wrap up our final Recreation credit. Four provinces, seven silly prairie mesh-back hats, one territory, one ridiculous British book, two sleepless nights, thousands of kilometres, and a snazzy chartered flight later, I found myself in a small isolated community of under 300 people tucked in a gorgeous bay on the east arm of Great Slave Lake.

Three weeks have seemed like a whirlwind, and although it has gone by in a blink, it feels like I have had a lifetime of learning. Being up here has given me a whole new perspective on what it is to be Canadian. To begin, the wildlife and the scenery are absolutely breathtaking in a really raw and barren way with harsh cliffs, stunted spruce, icy rivers,

miles of frozen lake and, besides the very small community of Lutsel K'e, not a single other settlement in sight. Being within this ruthless landscape for only minutes gives you this unbelievable appreciation for the people who have survived here for so long.

Every day is filled with challenges, but also with awe. The northern lights come out in the short-lived spring nights like they were on a timer. And though the trees and plants grow small, the winds rip, and the snow still lays thick and deep in early May, the animals grow big, healthy and hearty.

Within the first week, we had all had our turn ripping across the still frozen lake on snowmobiles to catch dinner for ourselves and the community. We had pulled out gigantic lake trout (which our Lutsel K'e friends claim are nothing above average), and learned to clean and cook them on an open fire alongside big chunks of caribou meat, fresh (and the most delicious) bannock and big pots of tea. The community welcomed us, with many offers of meat, fishing trips, lessons in shooting a rifle, a beautiful cabin to stay in, games, and above all their stories.

The people of Lutsel K'e were by far the most interesting and beautiful part of this adventure. They have and are continuing to endure hardships of living in isolation and are dealing with the aftermath of terrible decisions made by outsiders. Their knuckles are white from grasping onto what is left of their rich culture and way of life, but their hearts are overflowing with the pride of who they are, and how they have come to be. They are rising to the challenge of putting their feet down, and holding on to the land that is a crucial element of ensuring the integrity of their lifestyle, and the life of the land around them. The elders have the history, the middle-aged have modern knowledge and the young,



well, they have the hope. I think that together, they make a fine team. It was a phenomenal pleasure to have learned from all of them.

The second and third weeks were filled with time spent with the kids in the school (Kindergarten to Grade 10), hikes, meetings, and much more. We did two days of rock climbing with the high school kids, and, let me tell you, field trips are very different in the Northwest Territories. There is no such thing as a permission form or waivers, or even a seat belt. It was relaxed, fun and refreshing to think that maybe safety can take a vacation.

We witnessed the frustration of being in meetings that address serious issues where languages are a barrier, where goals and needs do not match, where people talk in circles, and where nobody leaves entirely happy. These meetings are only slight pebbles of the mountains that this community will have to climb to make their land the park they want it to be.

The trip began to wind down with a hiking trip along the Snowdrift River. The whitewater crashed, the snow fell, and we ate more hotdogs than you can shake a stick at. We spent our last few days hanging out with the kids, buying artwork, saying goodbyes and thank yous, and doing what all good Recreationers do: standing in a circle and reflecting.

On our last night, as the remaining daylight faded to deep blue in the midnight hour, the seven of us ran yelling and laughing into a small, open, freezing cold lead of the Great Slave Lake. Though the water was more than cold, it was exhilarating, and it felt absolutely amazing to be truly immersed in the north. Although we may never again use a rifle as an alarm clock, pay \$13 for a jar of salsa, eat a fish eyeball, hold a fresh 20-pound lake trout, tan a hide, or sit by a river sipping tea with six Dene Elders, these unique experiences are burned deep into our beings. It was one fantastic adventure.

I would like to thank everyone who supported us to make this excursion possible. Thanks to all of you who bought our baked goods, crafts, kilometres, and old clothes; thank you to ORPT, the Northern Research, personal donors, and LUSU for all the funding; thank you to our friends and family for your moral support and ideas; and thank you so much Leslie and Harvey for sticking with us, trusting us, mentoring us, and believing in us. Finally, I want to thank Michelle, James, Sarah, Jen, Meredith, and Jess for all of your hard work, your perseverance and your dedication. It was a truly fabulous northern adventure, and I am so glad to have done it with you.

Christy Norwood completed a Outdoor Recreation, Parks and Tourism degree as well as a Natural Science degree at Lakehead University last spring. She is currently studying to be a teacher in Lakehead's Outdoor Experiential and Environmental Education Program.